

A SHORT INTRODUCTION TO BYZANTINE MUSIC

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The Evdomadaria or Panthehti is a liturgical book containing all the hymns, prayers and readings from the scriptures that are sung or read during the year in the Greek Orthodox Church. The edition of 1796, which was printed in Venice, has 1848 pages. On almost every page there are about twenty hymns.

The production of this incredibly large body of hymnography was started in Constantinople, Jerusalem, Alexandria and Antioch in the middle of the 5th century. Romanos the Singer (5th-6th centuries), Sophronius Patriarch of Jerusalem (d. 638), Andrew of Crete (7th cent.) John Damascene (7th-8th centuries) and Kosmas of Jerusalem (8th cent.) are some of the most famous names in the history of Byzantine hymnography.

The language of Byzantine hymnography blends traditional Attic Greek, as it was taught in the Middle Ages in the schools of rhetoric and grammar, with many of the spoken forms. And its verses are made up of lines of different length in which the ancient Greek quantitative rhythm has been fully replaced by a system based on the accents of the words and the number of the syllables (rhythmic prose).

The creation of Byzantine hymns came to an end in the 11th century. All the feast days had their hymns and there was no room for more.

The music of most of the hymns was composed by the hymnographers themselves, who were in fact poet-musicians like the lyric poets of classic antiquity. Their melodies, however, like the Byzantine melodies of later periods, were not original compositions. They were based on melody-types or *echoi* akin to the Indian *ragas* and the Arabic *maqam*.

The origin of the melody-types, as Tillyard has shown, is composite. "The early church" he points out "in adopting the psalms and canticles

from the Old Testament would naturally borrow some of the Hebrew melodies as well. But as Greek music was predominant in most parts of the Roman Empire (the Latin West having adopted Greek musical theory) we can hardly be wrong in thinking that this element entered largely into early Christian hymnody, not, of course, in the complicated style of the classical theorists and the elaborate tone apparatus of professional players, but in the more popular and simpler forms, such as any gathering of men under the early Empire may have understood."

The earliest form of Byzantine musical notation is a primitive system consisting only of a limited number of conventional signs designed for the solemn reading of liturgical texts. It originated in the 8th century, and is generally known as Ekphonic notation.

The first signs of a notation for the music of the Byzantine liturgical hymns appears in the 10th century. This early system indicated only parts of the melodies and was useful only as an aid to the memory of the singer.

Around 1150, Byzantine notation was perfected into an adequate and clear system capable of representing a continuous melody. The new system is called Round or Middle Byzantine notation.

The principle of all forms of Byzantine notation is that its signs do not indicate pitches, as the signs of Western notation, but intervals to be taken from the tone reached previously. The starting note is always indicated by a special sign.

The melodies we find in the manuscripts of Round notation (12th-14th cent.) may not be the works of the hymnographers themselves, but were largely composed before the adoption of Round notation, since they are similar in content to melodies with identical texts handed down in manuscripts of the 10th and 11th centuries.

The invention of the Round notation coincides with the coming to an end of the production of new hymns and the emergence of the *maistores*. The word *maistor* is a Greek form of the word master and was a title given to ambitious church musicians of the 13th-15th centuries who had beautiful voices and delighted in recomposing the music of traditional hymns, inserting coloraturas between the authentic notes of traditional melodies or composing melodies on meaningless syllables like 'terirem' or 'nenana'. The greatest of all the *maistores* was John Cucuzeles (13-14th cent.) whose colourful biography had been written in English by Dawkins.

The *maistores* had a keen interest in the study of music theory and left us several valuable treatises or *Papadikai* dealing with such subjects as notation, modes, methods or performance, etc. The notation used and described by the *maistores* differs in several points from the Round system and was devised by the *maistores* themselves to suit the needs of their freer and more ornate style.

It has often been maintained that the conquest of Constantinople by the Turks in 1453 started a chain of developments which led away from the Byzantine models. This is not true. These developments were started by the *maistores* at the very beginning of the era of the Paleologs (1261-1453). The composers of the period of Turkish domination over Greece

(1453-1821) did nothing more than to continue working along the lines that had been set down by the *maistores*!

It has also been argued that the history of Greek church music from 1453 to the present day is one of increasing deterioration. This is also wrong. Composers such as the bishop Germanus of New Patrae (d.c. 1700), Balasius the priest (d.c. 1700), Peter Bereketis (d.c. 1770) and Peter Lampadarios the Peloponnesian (d. 1770) are as great as their medieval predecessors.

In 1818 Cucuzelian notation was improved by Chrysanthos, an archimandrite and later a bishop. Chrysanthine notation resembles the Cucuzelian system, but has none of its obscurities and a much smaller number of symbols. The notation is still in use in the Greek church.

The simplicity of Chrysanthine notation encouraged printing firms to undertake the printing of choir books. The first book of Byzantine music ever printed is a collection of melodies for the ordinary of the services for Sundays. It dates from 1820 and its editor is Peter Ephesios, a pupil of Chrysanthos. The complexity of Cucuzelian notation is the only reason for which Greek church music remained unprinted until so late a date.

Byzantine music, which has come down to us in thousands of manuscripts dating from the 10th-19th centuries, falls roughly into the following classes: (a) Early Byzantine music (950-1150); (b) Middle Byzantine music (1150-1300); (c) Late Byzantine music (1300-1450); (d) Neo-Byzantine music (1453-1900); Each class may be subdivided into smaller groups.

It is noteworthy that several Middle-Byzantine melodies have survived with slight modifications in Neo-Byzantine music, that some Neo-Byzantine melodies, which at first glance seem to be newly composed, are in fact melismatic variations of Middle-Byzantine melodies and that a large number of Neo-Byzantine melodies incorporate Middle-Byzantine melodic formulae derived from melodies set to entirely different texts. It goes without saying that the difference between two given classes is proportionate to their chronological differences.

Some Late—and Neo-Byzantine melodies imitate the style of Persian, Arabic and Turkish music. However, the Neo-Byzantine melodies built on Turkish modes are less numerous than it had been previously supposed.

The chants heard nowadays in those Greek churches which have not yet adopted Western musical manners, are mainly the works of a group of mid-18th century and early 19th century composers who are sometimes called the Phanariot school because their center of activity was a quarter of the old city of Constantinople called Phanar, which is the seat of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The most outstanding composer of the Phanariot school is Peter Lampadarios the Peloponnesian (c. 1730-1777).

We shall go on now to describe the principles of performance of Byzantine music, which have remained basically unchanged throughout its growth.

Byzantine music is sung by two male choirs or soloists in alternation (antiphonal psalmody). In some cases the choirs become engaged in a dia-

logue with the priest or deacon (responsorial psalmody). In the early Middle Ages the dialogue was often carried out between the clergy and the congregation.

A choir in a Greek church is made up of two classes of singers, the *psaltae* and the *isokratae*. The *psaltae* sing the melody in one part, while the *isokratae* sing the *ison*, a vocal drone, which lies usually on the tonic of the melody.

The leading singer of the right choir is called *protopsaltes* (i.e. first singer), and his opposite number *lampadarios* (i.e. bearer of the torch). The name *lampadarios* derives from the fact that in St. Sophia of Constantinople, on certain solemn occasions the principle singer of the left choir carried the torch of the Patriarch. The singers who occupy the second position in each choir are called *domestichoi*.

In the past the choirs used to sing together in unison a group of hymns in the middle of the morning service under the direction of a conductor named *cheironomos*. It seems that the *cheironomos* conveyed in stereotyped movements not only the beat and the dynamic shades of the music, but also the outline of typical melodic phrases. According to Chrysanthos the art of the *cheironomos* died out sometime around the mid-17th century.

In some churches, a boy called *canonarch* stands in front of the singers to announce the mode of each hymn and to recite on one or two notes the verse that is to be sung. Sandys, an English traveller who visited a Greek church in the early 17th century seems to believe that the alternation between the *canonarch* and the *psaltae* was caused by the illiteracy of some *psaltae* who were unable to read the texts of the hymns they were expected to sing.

Instruments are excluded from the performance of Byzantine music. Wellesz has pointed out, however, that the appearance of the Emperor in St. Sophia on Christmas eve was celebrated by the singing of an hymn to the accompaniment of a brass band. He has also shown that in the Middle Ages organs took an active part in the rehearsal and instruction of Byzantine music.

In 1930 a centre for the study of medieval Byzantine music was established in Copenhagen thanks to the efforts of two eminent philologists Carsten Hoeg of Denmark and H.J.W. Tillyard of Wales and the Austrian composer and musicologist Egon Wellesz, who has been a lecturer at Oxford since the beginning of the Second World War.

The centre, which is now directed by the ex-Princeton professor Oliver Strunk, publishes facsimiles of manuscripts and studies and transcriptions in a series of publications known as the *Monumenta Musicae Byzantinae*.

The music published in the "transcripta" series of the MMB is transcribed according to a method which was developed at first independently and later jointly by Tillyard and Wellesz.

The system has not yet been accepted by Greek specialists on the grounds that it introduces rhythms, rhymings and accentuations which disagree with the character of Greek music.

An attempt to reconcile the views of Greek and Western scholars has been made recently by a distinguished Greek specialist, Mrs. D. Mazarakis, in her book *The Musical Interpretation of the Folk Songs of the Iveron Monastery*. Similar attempts have been made also by the Dutch musicologist J. van Biezen.

It is to be hoped that these efforts will become the starting point of a closer collaboration between Western and Greek scholars, because as Velimirovic points out "no one of us has the monopoly in truth and the truth will become apparent only after many of us explore the various aspects of any given problem."